

READING & COMPREHENSION · JAPAN · FOUR CHAPTERS

# The Samurai

*Four short chapters on Japan's warrior class*

Level **B1–B2 (Intermediate)** Length **846 words** Questions **19** Answer key **included**

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

## 01 Who Were the Samurai?

1 The word itself tells you where they began. *Samurai* comes from an old verb, *saburau*, which means "to serve". They did not start as lords. To keep order, landowners armed the men who worked for them. Little by little, these armed servants became indispensable; then they became powerful; and in the end they became the government.

2 What matters is that samurai were a social class, not a job. Their height was the Edo period (1603–1868), when they made up roughly six per cent of the population — perhaps two million people. They alone were permitted to carry two swords. And most of them never fought anyone: they were armed clerks, inspectors, tax officials and guards.

## 02 Weapons and Armor

3 The *katana* is what everyone pictures, and it is the wrong picture. For most of samurai history the main weapon was the bow, over two metres long. Later, on crowded battlefields, the spear took over. The sword was a sidearm.

4 The blade itself, though, was a remarkable object. The smith began with *tamahagane*, steel made from iron sand, and folded it again and again to spread the carbon evenly. He then painted the blade with clay — thin along the cutting edge, thick along the back — and plunged it into water. The thinly covered edge cooled instantly and became extremely hard; the back cooled slowly and stayed springy, so the blade could bend instead of snapping. The curve appears at that moment, by itself. A second craftsman, the polisher, then spent weeks bringing out the *hamon*, the wavy line where the two kinds of steel meet.

*continued* →

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5 How a sword was carried mattered too. A mounted warrior slung a long *tachi* from his belt with the edge facing down. A man on foot pushed a *katana* through his sash with the edge facing up, so that drawing and cutting became one movement. With a short sword beside it, the pair was called the *daisho* — "big and small".

6 Between the blade and the hilt sat the *tsuba*, the guard. It stopped the hand from sliding onto the edge and balanced the weapon, and because it could be taken off and swapped for another, it was the one part of a sword that its owner could decorate as he pleased. During the long peace of the Edo period, specialist makers turned the *tsuba* into a small iron picture — cut through with waves, cranes or maple leaves, inlaid with gold and copper — and museums outside Japan now collect them as sculpture.

7 Armor changed with the fighting too. The early *o-yoroi* was a heavy box-shaped suit for a mounted archer, built from hundreds of small scales laced together with silk cord. It looked magnificent, but the cord soaked up rain, froze in winter and was slow to repair. It was the gun that changed how armor was made. Armorers began firing at their own breastplates and sold only the armor that did not break. Above it sat a tall crest, and often an iron face mask with a moustache, which held the helmet cord in place and frightened whoever stood in front of it.

## 03 The Age of Samurai Battles

8 Between 1467 and 1600 Japan tore itself apart. The Onin War began as a quarrel over who should succeed the shogun, burned much of Kyoto and left nobody in charge. In the century that followed, warfare grew from a few hundred mounted men into collisions between tens of thousands. Most of those men were *ashigaru* — foot soldiers taken from the villages, drilled to move in blocks and carrying spears up to five metres long, which they brought down like clubs as often as they used the point.

9 In 1543 a Portuguese ship brought matchlock guns to the small island of Tanegashima, and Japanese smiths copied them within a year. Moving a large army was also a problem in itself. In the noise and the smoke, orders travelled by conch shell, drum and flag, and warriors wore small banners upright on their backs so that their own side could tell who was who.

10 Castles changed as well, from wooden forts on mountain tops into the stone-based fortresses with white towers that visitors photograph today. A castle was rarely taken by storm. A siege did the work instead: the attackers would quietly buy up the rice around the castle in advance and starve the defenders out, or dam a river and flood them out.

11 Three battles are worth remembering. At Okehazama in 1560, Oda Nobunaga attacked an army perhaps ten times the size of his own during a thunderstorm and killed its commander. At Nagashino in 1575, Nobunaga's gunners fired from behind wooden fences and broke the finest cavalry in Japan. At Sekigahara in 1600, about 160,000 men met in a narrow valley in thick fog, and the battle turned when one commander changed sides in the middle of it. Tokugawa Ieyasu won, and Japan had a single ruler again.

## 04 The Women Who Fought

12 Not every samurai was a man. Women of the warrior class were trained with the *naginata*, a curved blade on a long shaft, and were expected to defend the household when the men rode away.

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# Questions

The Samurai — write your answers in full sentences where asked.

## PART A · COMPREHENSION

Choose the best answer.

**1.** The word *samurai* comes from an old verb meaning

**A** to fight.
**B** to serve.
**C** to ride.
**D** to rule.

**2.** According to Chapter 02, the main samurai weapon for most of their history was

**A** the katana.
**B** the matchlock gun.
**C** the bow.
**D** the short sword.

**3.** What made armorers change the way they built armor?

**A** The arrival of guns.
**B** A shortage of silk cord.
**C** An order from the shogun.
**D** The end of fighting on horseback.

**4.** According to Chapter 03, how was a castle usually taken?

**A** By attacking the walls at night.
**B** By starving or flooding the defenders out.
**C** By bringing more guns than the defenders had.
**D** By persuading its commander to change sides.

**5.** According to Chapter 04, what were women of the warrior class expected to do?

**A** Fight in the front line of every battle.
**B** Make the armor worn by their husbands.
**C** Defend the household when the men had ridden away.
**D** Carry messages between castles.

## PART B · IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Answer in full sentences.

**6.** Most samurai of the Edo period never fought anyone. What did they do instead? (¶ 2)

**7.** Why did the smith put **thin** clay on the edge of a blade and **thick** clay on the back? (¶ 4)

**8.** Why did each warrior wear a small banner upright on his back? (¶ 9)

**9.** The passage says a castle was "rarely taken by storm". What did attackers do instead? Give **two** methods. (¶ 10)

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# Questions

continued

## PART C · VOCABULARY

Write the letter of the matching meaning.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **A** | a weapon carried as a second choice | **B** | able to bend and return to shape |
| **C** | extremely impressive to look at | **D** | soldiers who fight on horseback |
| **E** | surrounding a place to force it to give in | **F** | the handle of a sword |
| **G** | too important to manage without | **H** | violent meetings of two forces |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ¶ 1 | **indispensable** | |
| ¶ 3 | **sidearm** | |
| ¶ 4 | **springy** | |
| ¶ 6 | **hilt** | |
| ¶ 7 | **magnificent** | |
| ¶ 8 | **collisions** | |
| ¶ 10 | **siege** | |
| ¶ 11 | **cavalry** | |

## PART D · THINK ABOUT IT

Two or three sentences each.

**10.** Chapter 02 says the katana "is what everyone pictures, and it is the wrong picture". Why do you think the sword, and not the bow or the spear, became the symbol of the samurai?

**11.** At Nagashino, gunners recruited from the villages broke the finest cavalry in Japan. What do you think happens to a warrior class once an ordinary farmer with a gun can defeat a warrior who has trained since childhood?

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# Answer Key

The Samurai — for the teacher

## PART A · COMPREHENSION

1. **B** — to serve.
2. **C** — the bow.
3. **A** — The arrival of guns.
4. **B** — By starving or flooding the defenders out.
5. **C** — Defend the household when the men had ridden away.

## PART B · IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Sample answers — accept any equivalent.

6. They were armed clerks, inspectors, tax officials and guards — government officials who were allowed to carry swords.
7. So that the two parts cooled at different speeds: the edge cooled fast and became very hard, while the back cooled slowly and stayed springy, so the blade could bend instead of snapping.
8. So that his own side could recognize him. Among tens of thousands of men in similar armor, in noise and smoke, it was the quickest way to tell friend from enemy.
9. They laid siege to it. They bought up the rice around the castle in advance so that the defenders starved, or they dammed a river and flooded them out.

## PART C · VOCABULARY

G **indispensable** (¶ 1) — too important to manage without

A **sidearm** (¶ 3) — a weapon carried as a second choice

B **springy** (¶ 4) — able to bend and return to shape

F **hilt** (¶ 6) — the handle of a sword

C **magnificent** (¶ 7) — extremely impressive to look at

H **collisions** (¶ 8) — violent meetings of two forces

E **siege** (¶ 10) — surrounding a place to force it to give in

D **cavalry** (¶ 11) — soldiers who fight on horseback

## PART D · THINK ABOUT IT

> Open response — there is no single correct answer. Look for a clear position supported by at least one detail taken from the passage. Question 10 works well as a short discussion: the passage has already given students the material for it — the bow and the spear did the work, but only samurai were allowed the two swords. Question 11 is the sharper of the two and leads naturally into the end of the samurai, which is not covered here.

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